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Chameleon Masculinity: Developing the British ‘Population-Centred’ Soldier

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Abstract

In this article I develop what I term *chameleon masculinity* as a specific form of gendered adaptation of military agency opened up by the post 9/11 shift towards ‘population-centred’ counterinsurgency and Stabilisation. A gendered analysis of this carefully cultivated form of military agency is central to revealing some of the concealed embodied dynamics that challenge the hegemony of the traditional combat soldier, and in practice enable this form of war. Drawing on eighteen months of anthropological fieldwork, for the most part alongside the UK’s Military Stabilisation Support Group, this research incorporates my auto-ethnography as an Officer in the Royal Naval Reserves. Rather than focusing at the level of policy, strategy, and doctrine, I examine how the specialised and masculinised agency of the chameleon translates tactically into the body of the British military Stabilisation Operative, showing how this is developed through intensive pre-deployment training in the UK, and embodied and practiced through operational deployment in Afghanistan. This reveals the specific agency of chameleon masculinity and how its potential for inherent violence becomes deceptively ‘hidden in plain sight’.

Key words: gender, masculinity, British military, counterinsurgency, stabilisation, anthropology, embodiment, agency, auto-ethnography

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“War is, therefore, not only a veritable chameleon, because in each concrete case it changes somewhat its character, but it is also ... a strange trinity.”
(Clausewitz, [1832] 1950: 18)

“There’s a method of altering how you conduct yourself. You need to know what the audience’s end state is, you need to influence, cajole and sometimes slap to get where you need to go. It’s a bit like being a chameleon, and I don’t mean that in a deceptive way.”
(Major R., UK Military Stabilisation Support Group, Field Notes, June 2009)

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth-century Prussian general and military strategist Carl von Clausewitz made the analogy that war was like a chameleon ‘because in each concrete case it changes somewhat its character’ (Clausewitz, [1832]1950: 18). This is true also in contemporary warfare. Recently there has been a grand strategic move from a large-scale military focus on overwhelming force to kill ‘the enemy’ through ‘hard kinetic’ action towards ‘population-centred’ counterinsurgency and Stabilisation practices. The aim has been to win the favour of local populations, enticing them towards the State and away from ‘insurgents’ through ‘soft’ ‘non-kinetic’ approaches or ‘soft power’. Like a chameleon war has yet again changed its outward character in relation to context as a means to catch ‘the enemy’, or as defence in order to be effective/survive.

In such contexts, and through the training of British ‘population-centred’ soldiers, or military ‘Stabilisation Operatives’, a specific form of chameleon-like embodied adaptation has developed. By using the term *chameleon masculinity* in this article, I gender a specific form of military agency opened up by the post 9/11 shift towards ‘population-centred’ counterinsurgency and Stabilisation¹. I suggest that such a gendered reading of this carefully cultivated form of military agency is central to revealing some of the concealed embodied dynamics that challenge the hegemony of the traditional combat soldier. By practising this form of chameleon masculinity they are enabling this form of war.

Importantly, gender, like war, has a chameleon-like quality; it is ‘... extraordinarily relational, with a chameleon-like flexibility, shifting in importance, value and effects from

¹ In the UK, ‘Stabilisation’ is a cross-governmental process that has primarily drawn together the UK’s departments of defence, diplomacy and development, it is based on the ‘promotion of peaceful political settlement to produce a legitimate indigenous government’ with the so-called aim of ‘establishing peace and security in countries affected by conflict and instability’ (JDN 6/10, 2010: 1-1).

context to context or from field to field' (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004: 6). Within military contexts, both military men and women go through a continuous militarisation process where they learn to reproduce and subsequently embody a range of culturally specific military masculinities. The tongue-in-cheek phrase "*It's not pink and fluffy, it's difficult and dangerous!*" (MoD, 2006), used by one British army NCO to explain their 'population-centred' soldiering role, acknowledges, even as it tries to deny, the friction between the 'difficult and dangerous' traditional masculine 'warrior' of the combat soldier and that of the 'pink and fluffy' feminised diplomatic military facilitator.

While binary oppositions, such as 'pink and fluffy'/'difficult and dangerous' are useful to introduce the debate, the way that masculinities and femininities are (re)produced in their multiplicity can be both paradoxical and competing. Gender and the relational constructions of masculinity and femininity are practices that are produced socially, therefore the British military is a reflection of how social structures shape the actions of military individuals and vice versa (Enloe, 2007; Hearn, 1996; Connell, 2002; Kimmel, [2000] 2011: 10).

A gendered analysis at the operational and tactical level is vitally important, not least because of the life and death implications for all involved. As Sjoberg argues "it is only possible to fully understand gender in the context of war and conflict, and ... it is only possible to fully understand war and conflict considering their gendered aspects" (Sjoberg, 2014: 5). However, as Marcia Kovitz observes, a perceived male/female divide 'deflects attention from the fault lines along which military masculinity fractures internally', contributing to the 'perpetuation of the military's attachment to a uniform masculinity (uniformity, strength, etc.) and an opposition to femininity (diversity, weakness, etc.)...' (Kovitz, 2003: 9). This masks the tensions 'between multiple and unequal military masculinities', themselves crucial clues in understanding 'population-centred' military masculinity, and specifically chameleon masculinity. As one 'population-centred' soldier, or military 'Stabilisation Operative', told me during fieldwork, you need the skills to perform credibly in front of a wide range of audiences, 'to blend in with the environment'. However, if these skills are lacking there is intolerance within both wider military and civilian settings. Rather skilfully though he said, '*There's a method of altering how you conduct yourself... It's a bit like being a chameleon, and I don't mean that in a deceptive way*'.

There remains a gap in research, especially British anthropological ethnographic studies, that examine the militarisation processes used to develop and generate valour for other figures of the soldier as they become politically desirable. A focus on the processes, practices, and operational and tactical agency of specialist military units – such as those focused on counterinsurgency and Stabilisation - occupying in-between positions at the forefront of political, policy and doctrinal change, can provide rich sites for the critical examination of the gendered dynamics of militarisation.

Rather than focusing at the level of policy, strategy, and doctrine, this article, through an examination of the agency of chameleon masculinity, examines how these then translate operationally and tactically into the body of the British military Stabilisation Operative. It

explores how these grand strategies are lived, performed and embodied; how they look and feel, and also how they challenge, expand, but also constrain the situational and sensory awareness of the soldier. I show how this translation occurs through operational deployment to Afghanistan and developed through intensive pre-deployment training in the UK. In what follows, I outline the context of my field research through my reflexive position in relation to the British military. The article then proceeds by firstly introducing the concept of chameleon masculinity, secondly by examining chameleon masculinity 'in action', and thirdly by focusing on how this flexible agency is trained in the UK.

An Auto-Ethnography

Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, for the most part alongside the UK's *Military Stabilisation Support Group* from 2008 to 2010, this work has incorporated my own auto-ethnography of military membership as an Officer in the Royal Naval Reserves from 2001 to 2012. Through my dual role as an anthropologist² and member of the Royal Navy, I gradually learnt to oscillate between being an insider (Officer) and an outsider (anthropologist) and 'see' but more specifically *sense* these gendered dynamics. A complex process happened while I observed the 'constant and enduring interplay of biological and social forces' as the bodies of those around me were being 'simultaneously created, maintained and changed' (Gerschick, 2005: 369), and the visible and invisible gendered dynamics of this process.

I began my anthropological training in 2003, initially as a Masters student and then as a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex. At the time, the Royal Navy with all its signs, symbols, customs, conventions, and my position as a junior female Reservist Officer, dominated my experience of the military world. It was in part this lived experience and reflexive negotiation of anthropological and military identities that attracted me to the UK's Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG), as I searched for a military role where I might fit. I initially approached the Group with a view to joining as the Stabilisation Operative role interested me; I felt the methodological similarities with the anthropological participant observation approach of gathering information, and the role asked of these Operatives in the way they were being trained to interact and engage with people.

However, anthropological involvement with military forces is a highly charged, and politically contentious area (see for example, González, 2004, 2009; American Anthropological Association, 2007; Robben, 2010; Price, 2011), especially in relation to the context of application. As I became more aware of the debates and practices my position as a conscientious objector gradually emerged and I made the decision not to deploy operationally to Afghanistan. Crucially, despite the Stabilisation role being considered 'softer' by the wider military and British government, and therefore potentially less directly violent, it was essentially a set of non-kinetic warfare practices with a continuum of intended and unintended

² Importantly, my research was an anthropology 'of', rather than 'for', the military; it was independently funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.

violent consequences. Indeed, the gendered nature of Stabilisation would prove to be far from stable, rather it was inherently destabilising. My research was focused solely on UK based training, and I presented myself as a civilian anthropologist, although my informants knew me initially through my military identity. I did however draw on my participant observation of military membership and the ‘insider’ knowledge this has generated. Ultimately, my research process led to my resignation from the armed forces in 2012, and my choice in developing a critical military stance.

In the section that follows, I introduce and situate the concept of chameleon masculinity within the broader framing of counterinsurgency and Stabilisation operations.

1. CHAMELEON MASCULINITY

Clausewitz draws on the popular³ analogy of a chameleon – a lizard with the ability to change its skin colour to blend with its surroundings, camouflaging itself depending on context, either for self-defence or as a means of catching prey – to illustrate the outer character or surface flexibility and fluidity of war. But for Clausewitz, war is ‘not only a veritable chameleon, because in each concrete case it changes somewhat its character, but it is also ... a strange trinity’ (Clausewitz, 1950: 18). Like chameleons unable to change their innate physiological nature, the inner nature of war, according to Clausewitz, does not change (although contemporary debates have challenged this notion, see for example Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, 2007). It is the conception of the external change within the body and collective bodies that captures the essence of chameleon masculinity as a specialised form of operational and tactical military agency⁴ that is developed within the body of the military Stabilisation Operative.

Chameleon masculinity military agency is a more calculated form of operational and tactical force that embodies Clausewitz’s ‘strange trinity’ (passion, chance, rationality) of dominant forces in specific ways. This is directed through carefully honed masculine performances and practices tailored to different audiences and environments in order to influence in-theatre military personnel and civilians to fulfil British political aims of ‘population-centred’ counterinsurgency and Stabilisation.

The concept of chameleon masculinity builds on Laleh Khalili’s notion of the ‘soldier-scholar’. Referring to the American context, but applicable also to the UK, Khalili demonstrates how Western liberal interventionism in Afghanistan created space within policy arenas for the generation of a new military masculinity. Driven by ‘white, literate, articulate and doctorate-festooned’ ‘soldier-scholars’, this new masculinity, on the surface, presents as

³ Scientific studies have revealed that chameleons, rather than changing colour to match their surroundings, instead have this ‘remarkable ability to exhibit complex and rapid colour changes during social interactions such as male contests or courtship’ (Teyssier, et. al. 2015).

⁴ Agency defined in this case as the ability ‘to be the source and originator of acts’ (Rapport and Overing, 2001: 1).

softer, sensitive, less violent, even humanitarian, when contrasted with the emblematic combat soldier, the ‘warrior kings’ of the traditional army (Khalili, 2010: 1475). This ‘new’ masculinity is represented as the ‘ultimate in civic virtue, ... the embodiment of international wisdom, war-fighting prowess, and a kind of knowingness about the world’ (Khalili, 2010: 1487). Behind this is the belief that when translated operationally and tactically, the associated counterinsurgency practices and performances would win the ‘hearts and minds’ of civilian populations – ‘smart power’ (ibid.).

However, in the American case this shift to a new military masculinity has ‘led to an institutional identity crisis that has coalesced around a discourse of institutional gender, or put another way, around the very ‘masculinity of the Army’ (Gardiner 2012: 371-372; Dyvik, forthcoming). The core masculine and patriarchal inner nature of the institution has been challenged by ‘population-centred’ counterinsurgency, and the varying iterations of national whole-of-government forms of ‘peace support’ that have ensued.

This institutional identity crisis can also be read within the wider British military. Although, in the British context this can be conceptualised more as a rupture, an example of the ways in which the military has attempted to transition, sending painful ripples through traditional military male-dominated gender norms. Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely, a Scots Guards infantry soldier, notes some of the cultural challenges and tensions the army especially has faced as a result of this shift (Kiszely, 2006). He highlights the conservative pride imbued, rigidly hierarchical and tradition bounded structures and associated cultures of the British army. The result is a fragile and defensive institution that fears destabilisation and is resistant to change. Culturally negative perceptions of counterinsurgency, ‘it’s not ‘proper’ soldiering’, along with misrecognition of counterinsurgency for traditional warfighting, provides a site for intense tension and operational and tactical challenges. This is “easy to do, because counter-insurgency often *looks, smells and feels* like warfighting; indeed, some participants at some moments may be fighting for their lives”, however it’s through this resistance and misrecognition that “fundamental errors in application” can ensue (ibid.: 18) (my emphasis).

While Kiszely does not explicitly refer to gender and the patriarchal nature of British military structures and culture, the gendered undercurrents throughout his writing are tangible. He reflects on the British military lesson-learning process claiming that ‘perhaps the single most significant cultural factor affecting a military’s ability to learn about counter-insurgency [and by extension the goals of Stabilisation] is the strength of its warrior ethos’ (ibid.). To have self-perceptions of ‘the warrior’ and a population-centred ‘something other’ is for Kiszely ‘remarkably difficult’, since the two verge on being mutually exclusive. Herein lies the ‘space in-between’ and indeed the ‘bodies in-between’. The gendered challenge to the ‘warrior ethos’ by the new masculinity of counterinsurgency and the resulting crisis of masculinity clearly shows the need for a gendered analysis to help articulate this ‘something other’ (see also, for example, Welland, 2015a).

The UK's Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG) fills this space in-between and specifically trains this 'something other'. The MSSG's function (see figure 1) means that its members must learn to modify their military embodiment to engage with and facilitate particular social relations, and direct their agency towards a range of 'audiences' in the numerous spaces of the Afghan theatre of war (major air bases such as Camp Bastion or Kandahar, operating bases such as Lashkar Gah, out in the Forward Operating Bases and their environs - local villages, fields and wadis). Within all these spaces and regardless of the audience, the driving force is that the 'people remain the prize' (Kilcullen, 2006: 117).

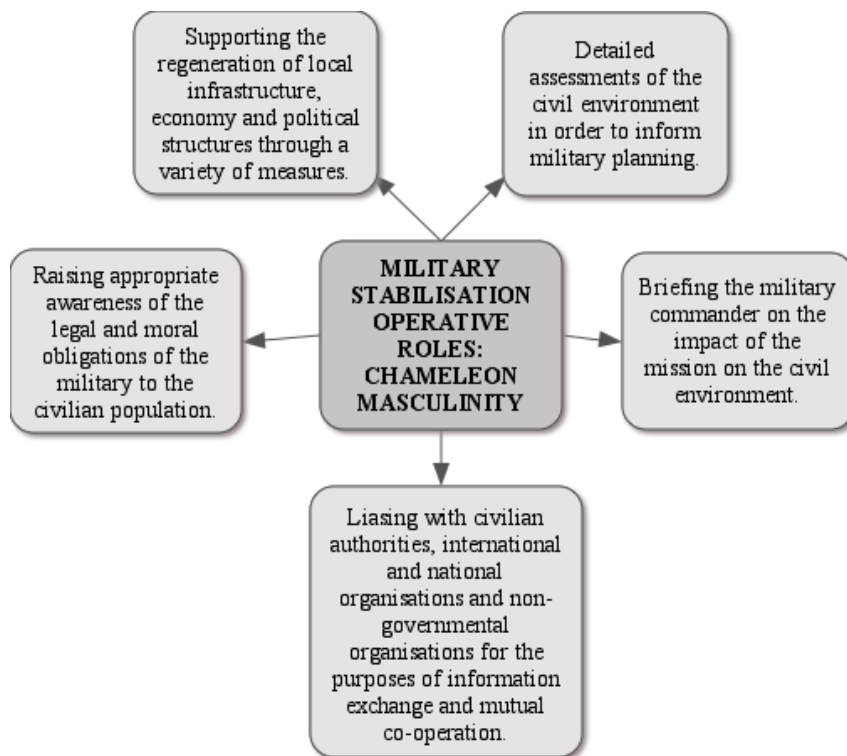


Figure 1: Key Roles of Military Stabilisation Support Group Personnel [Developed from Field Notes]

The MSSG is a small, specialist unit that at the time of my research had a complement of twenty-six regular personnel and one hundred reservists. In addition, cadres of around forty new recruits, drawn from across the services, were being trained for each six-month Operation Herrick⁵ tour of Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The Group played a key role in British operations in Helmand, being tasked in part with facilitating – operationally and tactically – wider British military adaptation to population-centred counterinsurgency and Stabilisation grand strategy. After three-months of intense training, these new military

⁵ Since 2002 'Operation Herrick' has been the British codename for ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) interventions in Afghanistan. Unlike American military tours, which last a year, the majority of British tours last for six months. As a consequence, the British suffer from the effects of "six-month-ism". One military Stabilisation Operative informant told me he chuckled when people say that the British have been in Afghanistan for five years, arguing, "No we haven't, we've been there for ten lots of six months".

Stabilisation Operatives deployed in specialist six-person teams (comprising an Officer, usually of Captain rank, and five SNCOs) alongside wider British military headquarter and battle group formations (representing a predominantly infantry chain of command). The Group is army led but tri-service; recruiting is opened out to the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force (troubling the distinction of ‘the soldier’ as solely tied to the army). It accepts regulars and reservists, men and women, officers and predominantly senior but some junior non-commissioned officers, from across the spectrum of ‘teeth’ (‘close in and kill’) and ‘tail’ (supporting) arms (while recognising the changing nature of the ‘front line’ in Afghanistan and the range of specialist military personnel at this ‘coal face’). Indeed, this diverse ‘hybrid’ composition is spun as a selling point by the Group, with the claim that members are ‘able to shift and blend methodology between military and civilian thinking / behaviours due to this hybrid make-up’ (MSSG, 2015). It is to this ‘shifting and blending’, specifically in relation to social and sensory processes, that I now turn.

2. SWITCHING HEADS

How might we begin to understand the social and sensory processes involved in developing chameleon masculinity? In order to examine how the body of the infantry soldier is produced, the British ex-infantry soldier turned sociologist, John Hockey draws on phenomenological studies, notably using the work of Merleau-Ponty, to examine consciousness and the objects of direct experience (Hockey, 2009: 477-478). A phenomenological approach enables an “analysis in which the interrelationship between social and sensory processes is examined” (ibid.: 478). Hockey’s work on the sensory embodiment of the infantry patrol is valuable; it helps to highlight the challenges and tensions vis-à-vis the performances required of the Stabilisation Operative.

These operatives are required to embed with (attach to military units) and fit into the infantry dominated military chain of command, and with infantry patrols on the ground. Traditional soldiering is the first essential building block of the Stabilisation role, if members do not ‘cut the mustard’ and master these combat skills and associated levels of fitness, their credibility and status are adversely affected in relation to their team members but also the wider (infantry dominated) military they would be operating alongside in theatre. As MSSG training Major R_ explained to me:

I’ve had the opportunity to carry my weapon in many different environments, including conventional theatres. It’s very difficult to replicate training because you cannot generate the fear that a hostile environment creates. You do not have the resources to simulate outwards patrols. If you’re teeth arm trained you’re trained, you know when to lower your weapon and when not to. If you’re not from that background it’s different. You shouldn’t underestimate the requirement, so I’d rather military Stabilisation Operatives who can soldier [*that is ‘teeth arm soldiers, rather than members of the ‘backward arms’ who have only basic or no*

soldiering skills when starting Group training] because of the environment you're in.

He continued, referring to two types of power, formal and informal, formal relying on the authority of the uniform and rank, informal relying on leadership, teamwork and personality:

One of the greatest weakness has been some of the MSSG's Junior Officers, they were scarred from their operational tour, they had different experiences because of their characters and their personalities; they didn't have the character to back up their rank. As a Major I automatically command the respect and credibility. The two Captains were 'non-teeth' Captains, they didn't have the rank or the experience. (Fieldwork Interview.)

Stabilisation Operatives therefore have the tricky task of being able to perform as credible infantry soldiers, with the associated desired masculine qualities of the combat soldier. At the same time, they must also be able to influence the 'chain of command' within military headquarters and out on the ground, which requires 'moral character' and lateral thinking in order to stand up and challenge up this 'chain of command'.

However, not all members are deemed able to make the transitions required from traditional soldiering roles tied into kinetic operations to the more 'civilian dimensions'. The training Major continued, *'At the moment we [the MSSG] are taking people, Senior NCOs and senior Captains who are too far in to change their character, without the ability or flexibility to understand the 'audience'.* This type of work requires flexibility of (masculine) performance, the ability to alter embodied practice and with this gain credibility, to both understand and influence the 'audience' towards the political objectives behind the role. They must be able to operate both according to traditional masculine soldiering values, and to also take on the role of mediators, politicians and advocates, both in relation to the local populations, and within their own organisation. If the Stabilisation Operative is able to gain this spectrum of credibility, that person has the means (if he or she has enough skill) to not so subtly "influence, cajole, and sometimes slap" infantry soldiers and upper military echelons they work alongside to adjust to populations centred counterinsurgency and broader Stabilisation practices.

To achieve this flexibility, he told me that there is 'a method of altering how you conduct yourself'. Connecting to Hockey's analysis of British infantry soldiers on patrol, where the embodied nature of traditional combat soldiering is under examination, the phrase "switch on", an infantry specific term, was used to indicate the switching "on" of the senses - through movement, sight, sound, smell and touch - the aim being to maximise 'individual and collective capacity to kill the enemy', as well as for personal and collective self-defence (2009: 481).

The word "Switch" was also used frequently by my informants; for many, the hardest task was learning to "switch on and *between* heads", a 'soldier head' and a 'Stabilisation head'. As one Colour Sergeant explained, the soldier head "means you have to have full time situational awareness at any time. Being an asset to the real fighting troops who you are attached to, not a

liability”, but at the same time, you also need to develop and know when to ‘switch on and to’ a Stabilisation head:

Colour Sergeant (CS): Your Stabilisation head is always on, too, though, looking when out on the ground for opportunities to ensure the Helmand Implementation Plan is snapped up [*by local nationals*].

L: A Stabilisation head, and a soldier head?

CS: Yes, always two heads, but two heads that need to be quickly changed to whichever situation exists on the ground.

L: The Stabilisation head is softer?

CS: Not pink and fluffy as such, as the work is pretty full on. But in essence it is more a civilian mentality or indeed the way humanitarians work, but no we do not do humanitarian work [*laughs*], although sometimes we do interact, but only if they are truly viable options for the good and benefit of both the people and the GIROA [*Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*]. This is where Operators can get it very wrong.

Chameleon masculinity therefore necessitates numerous embodied negotiations, in relation to the wider military (the ability to challenge up and down the chain of command) and in relation to civilian populations (direct kinetic violence verses ‘armed social work’, (Kilcullen, 2006)). The MSSG training process, firstly, teaches new recruits to believe in the tenets of the broader Stabilisation approach (taught by soldier-scholars from the upper military echelons, but also ‘blooded’ Stabilisation Operatives who have preformed successfully in theatre); secondly, to then advocate these practices to the wider British military; and thirdly, to put these practices into motion out ‘on the ground’.

However, this is not only premised on the ability to “switch on” as Hockey explains (2009: 481), but also in this case on the ability to “switch heads”. While it is clearly a physical impossibility to simply switch heads, the corporeal metaphor must be performed and expressed in other ways, such as through posture, how weapons are carried and deployed, verbal reasoning and negotiating conceptualisations of ‘the enemy’. The embodied work of this kind of soldiering is therefore built on, expanded, challenged, and restrained by learning to embody this chameleon-like masculinity.

In order to do so effectively, Stabilisation Operatives need to embody the ‘specific forms of cognitive and corporeal knowing’ of soldiering through movement, sight, sound, smell and touch. At the same time they also need this flexibility to “switch” between the cognitive and corporeal situated knowledge of the ‘teeth armed trained soldier’ and ‘Stabilisation head’. ‘This lived space then produces specific forms of cognitive and corporeal knowing which are the outcome of spatial practices. These practices are socially specific in terms of being linked to particular physical features but also have their own history’ (Hockey, 2009: 481), as I shall show by a specific example of chameleon masculinity in action.

Helmand Province, Afghanistan: Operation Moshtarak

Sam (a pseudonym), a Warrant Officer (SNCO) with a ‘teeth arm’ background and one of my key informants, described to me the ‘space of representation’ or ‘lived space’ (Lefebvre, 1991) through the ways in which he directed agency through learnt Stabilisation practices. I first met Sam on the two-week introductory Stabilisation Practitioners course at the beginning of his three-month run up to operational deployment and shadowed him through parts of his UK training, meeting him once again on his return from Afghanistan. He told me about his experience of the large military push or ‘surge’ operation of his six-month tour, Operation Moshtarak. His account is an example of the ways in which he altered his own body response and the responses of the bodies around him, challenging the established patterns of situational and sensory awareness of the combat soldier. He relayed his experience to me with enthusiasm, as an example of a successful ‘Stabilisation’ mission:

So we had one X_ [helicopter] go into Moshtarak on D-day at 0400 hours and I was on the fucker. There were fifteen SFSG [*Special Forces Support Group*], there were eight ATF [*Afghanistan Task Force*], there were eight 1 G_ [*a section from a British platoon*] and there was me and the medic Staff Sergeant and an Engineer Staff Sergeant who was there to build the PBs [*Patrol Bases*] once it’d all settled down. They were inserting him then because they didn’t expect to be able to get back there, it was going to be cut off. The time line from D-day to D+10 was meant to be our ten days of fighting into the kalay [*village*] to get to the centre where the mosque was, hold the mosque, hold a *Shura* [*Arabic for consultation, a meeting where decisions are made*] and explain [*to the local nationals*] what we were up to and then see what happened from there.

We hit the deck, door down; HMVS [*helmet mounted vision system*] is on, and I ran off thinking I’m going straight into a bit of a battle here. But no battle! And we ended up walking towards the compound that we were going to, which was 200 metres short of the village, walking in there, taking it over, not a round fired. The sun came up, a small group of people started to congregate at the end of the village, and I thought well, there’s two ways it can go.

While Sam’s embodied combat senses are “switched on”, it is at this point that he “switches heads”. He reads the environment by sight, drawing on the ‘cultural codes’ and the ‘particular cultural knowledge’ taught during Stabilisation training. He told me:

But I thought, well there are kids there, there are women there, they’re not there to fight, it was glaringly obvious. They could have been and it would probably would have drifted that way if we’d have let it go, but it didn’t drift that way because I didn’t give it time.

Sam then persuaded the team to take a less aggressive stance, in doing so challenging their trained situational and sensory awareness. Firstly, he was able to establish credibility, drawing on his ‘teeth arm’ background and informal and formal credibility:

By this time the young Lieutenant and Captain [*from the 1 G_*] had realised that I was their Q [*C’Q’MS, Company Quartermaster*] at Sandhurst [*military academy*] and one had started to go “Oh Q, what do I do, what do I do?” So I said “Well, we need to go and have a look at ‘em and have a chat with ‘em”, and he said “Well what happens if they fucking decide to kick

off?” and I said “We’ll fucking slot the lot of ‘em”. I said “If they’re going to kick off it’s going to be at us so you just return fire”.

While there was the potential for a direct ‘hard’ kinetic response Sam prioritised the response of communication, he was then able to persuade the patrol to ‘go and have a chat’, with the aim of diffusing the situation. He persuaded the military bodies alongside him to alter their posture as they moved towards the village, by walking down the street with most weapons lowered, despite the intelligence report and conditioned training of these soldiers:

We walked all the way down the 200 yards to the centre of the village by which time the 1G_ Captain and the SFSG were like “fucking hell” cloud nine, like that, but at the same time: “Oh my God, we’re going to get hit in a minute, we’re going to get hit in a minute”. The 1G_ were shitting themselves, the ATF were bayonets drawn ready to go. We got into the centre of the village; I walked into the shop, bought some tins of coke, crate of coke, helmet off, rifle on me back.

For Sam the ‘courageous’ ‘warrior-like’ response was less aggressive posturing, and here he directly challenges and makes fun at the vulnerability of the traditional combat soldier’s embodied performances. From this position he then arranged a shura, sitting outside the Mosque with all 300 members of the village, “we all had a coke, by which time everybody started to calm down a bit, I held a Shura, had a chat, and explained why we were there”. As he reflected:

So, yeah it was very good, but that was very strange because if I hadn’t gone and spoken to them [*the villagers*] straightaway then what would have happened? They would have turned hostile probably and then we’d have had a fight on our hands but we managed to kick it into touch quickly by going and having a chat with them. We sat there and I thought that’s mad and I remember sitting there going, right it’s D day I ain’t got the fuck what we’re going to do until D+10 because I’ve already held the *Shura* that I’m meant to have held on D+10, we’ve had no fighting. For the next fifteen days we had *shura* after *shura* we had meals we had BBQs, the lot, with the locals you know just to show willing. They absolutely loved it; they couldn’t have done anything more for us if they’d tried.

Sam relayed this account to me as a positive example, often though Stabilisation Operatives were not as successful. As another one of my informants summarised:

The majority of the guys on the ground, interacting with the locals are infantry. They are not known for their thinking approach. They are trained and internally educated in a narrow field of military operations and are bloody good at running around slotting people with their Bergens [*military rucksacks*] on their back. But generally, the ideas for COIN [*counterinsurgency*] or Stabilisation are not that easy to reconcile with red meat-eating killers. A lot of them do really, really, want to get into fire fights and slot some Taliban, have some dits [*stories*] to spin, get a medal. It’s what they trained for. It may not always be what they wanted to originally join for, but, unlike some salt water phobic matelots [*Royal Navy sailors doing land rather than sea jobs*], they want to do what they’ve been trained to do and get stuck in, not organise tea parties for old men [*referring to shuras with village elders*].

Herein lies the tension of counterinsurgency and Stabilisation practice. It involves non-kinetic forms of violence, through ‘thinking’ and an associated re-embodied response, holding back on the direct kinetic violence of ‘slotting’ people, through ‘courageous restraint’ or ‘tactical patience’⁶, and functions around interacting in various social spaces, such as “organis[ing] tea parties for old men”. For the combat soldier (both on the ground and higher up the chain of command in military headquarters) this is a direct challenge to their embodied soldiering knowledge and the masculine practices they have learnt to valorise. For the trained Stabilisation Operative, the challenge is firstly to embody the practices required of this role as its re-appropriation of negatively gendered practices and performances, and then to perform effectively in theatre (non-kinetic violence). But how are these embodied performances trained in the UK?

3. ORGANISING TEA PARTIES FOR OLD MEN

To develop agency, Stabilisation Operatives embark on a gendered process of training to develop specific body reflexive practices. The spatial location of training is essential to the creation of gendered military identities, ‘Men [and women] are made’ outside on bleak windswept hills and plains, in freezing rivers, military barracks, class rooms, sports halls, messes, and bars (Woodward, 2003). Indeed, traditional combat training in such locations forms the base line of the three-month MSSG training package (developed through the eight sections of the army’s Military Annual Training Tests⁷ (MATTS)). However, context has opened up a new range of spaces, for example, the Afghan shura, and Forward Operating Bases (FOBs). Recruits would take a range of Stabilisation focused courses, involving classroom lectures, associated ‘desk-top’ exercises, and simulation role-plays, for example rehearsing how to build rapport and gather intelligence during shuras, as well as in operating from mock-up FOBs.

In what follows, I examine how new recruits are taught to embody the flexibility of performance within two of these different spaces, and some of the tensions this reveals. Firstly, through a classroom lecture on ‘influencing and negotiating’ where Operatives are introduced to the space of the Afghan shura, a key site to ‘blend in’, gather intelligence and direct agency. Secondly, team role-play exercises in a mock up Forward Operating Base. Here, two elements that inform the ability to influence and negotiate are tested, through the

⁶ To address the balance between kinetic and non-kinetic action, one term that came into use was ‘courageous restraint’. Coined by American General Stanley McChrystal, courage, one of the valorised attributes of soldiering associated with bravery under fire, was connected to a form of self-control that associated bravery with the resistance of conditioned reflexes, valorising “the use of brainpower rather than firepower”. It was subsequently replaced by the phrase ‘tactical patience’, which was deemed to be less confusing for soldiers and, as one of my informants described, “more war-y”.

⁷ MATTs: 1. Personal Weapon Training; 2. Fitness, 3. Battlefield Casualty Drills; 4. Chemical, Biological Radiological, Nuclear (CBRN), 5. Navigation; 6. Values and Standards; 7. Operational Law; 8. Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape (SERE).

development of empathy, and the militarised and politicised opening out of conceptualisations of ‘the Other’ (Said, 1979: 1).

Influencing and Negotiating

During training recruits were told: “negotiating effectively will be at the heart of what you’ll be doing”. In their first “Negotiating and Influencing Skills” lecture, Dr Shields (a pseudonym) began by talking the teams through three senses: of ‘achievement’, ‘belonging’, and ‘control’, and the behaviours displayed by each. I am sat at the back of the classroom, listening with interest. Looking around, I note the majority of the class looks bored and unengaged. A few people are taking notes; the Reservists and Officers in the group appear to be concentrating the most. After this initial introduction, Dr Shield’s continued:

I want to offer you some strategies and techniques, all of which will be cross-cultural. *Shuras* are core influence activities; they are deeply entrenched within Afghan culture. It’s all about the people, dealing *with* people; it’s complicated and messy. Here is a list of people where influence will lie [*she runs through a powerpoint slide*].

The complexity and ‘messiness’ of learning to interact, of developing this highly politicised and militarised ‘cross-cultural’ knowledge, strikes a discord with the ‘simplicity’ of the list of influential players or key leaders to engage with. She continued:

You’ll all be working at a tactical level; there will be repercussions from the decisions that you make and it’s the *Shura* that will be the backbone of these decisions. During this process trust is something you’ll need to earn, remember that you can lose it in a second. I strongly recommend you rehearse *Shuras*. Use them to establish and build trust.

The building of ‘trust’ would depend on the correct performance, of being able to shift, blend and adapt, through ‘small talk’:

One of the most important ways of working on the ground is through small talk. You must be aware of power play strategies. It’s vital that you know what people have said, agreed with and disagreed with. Build up rapport, start to dig in and interact with the locals. Becoming a better negotiator requires self-awareness.

The teams would have to develop self-awareness, of how the body of the Stabilisation Operative, through postures, language and cultural knowledge could be used to direct agency, through the subtle forms of ‘power play’, a key embodied response that recruits would need to “switch” to.

The class continues to look bored as she proceeds with the lecture. For some reason she is not winning credibility. When she talks about self-control and the emotions involved, one of the infantry trained soldiers who has been tapping his feet, checking his phone, laughing, looking around the room, says: “*fucking hell, fuck this*” just as Dr Shields says: “*I promise you, emotion labelling is not ‘hippy dippy’, it is actually very powerful, the reason why it works is*

that all of us like to know that someone is understanding and listening”.

When she begins to talk about body language and mirroring the class becomes even more restless. Another male ‘teeth arm’ trained SNCO soldier gets up and walks out, something that I had not seen before. It was unclear to me why he walked out: was it because Dr Shields was female, or was it that she was female and talking about emotions etc.? There was real tension and in places overt resistance within the Group to this form of militarised masculinity, to becoming chameleon-like. Of course, not everyone in the room had this response, some participants were very engaged, although my discussion with Reservists afterwards revealed they had found the lecture quite patronising. Later I spoke with Major K_ who was running the training exercise, relaying the responses I had observed. I asked why he thought some had responded in a negative way, he replied: *“these exercises put them outside of their comfort zone. The military has a tendency to be ‘shouty shouty’. In the negotiation exercises they’re actually having to learn to talk to people. When they come back from theatre they’ll actually be wishing that they had more negotiation training”.*

Crucially, in order to influence and negotiate, recruits would have to develop a carefully controlled understanding of ‘empathy’ and engage with conceptualisations of ‘the Other’:

Empathy and the ‘Other’

“What is the difference between sympathy and empathy?” was the question directed at the room in one of my first introductory lectures with the Group. It was outlined that both were emotional responses and that sympathy was feeling ‘for’ someone without having an understanding for how they were feeling, while empathy was feeling ‘with’ someone, with the ability to consider a situation from the position of the other person. The conclusion was that *“The good Stabilisation Operative has to learn to empathise.”*

Lectures and training exercises were designed to induce empathy and stimulate lateral thinking, but also to shape this emotional response and the method of thinking through a trained and controlled opening out of cultural awareness of ‘the Other’. Operatives were warned, in a lecture delivered by a soldier-scholar, that Stabilisation was *“Not a moral crusade! But an important part of consolidating the battlefield”* that they must not *“Lose impartiality”* towards the ‘Other’, remembering their partiality to the military mission. The aim was to *“Spot threats or problems from the civilian dimension”* but to do this they had to *“Be fully aware of local conditions”* through engagement with ‘the natives’ but must not *“Go native – no tree hugging”*. Within the ‘civilian dimension’ they must *“Be approachable”* but must not *“Fall into the feel good trap”*. As one of my informants explained, this was doing ‘stuff that was nice for people’: *“we’re not out there to do good things for people, we’re out there to make the mission work, but most people are cynical and bitter and twisted enough not to fall into the nice things to do trap”*. Relatedly, there was a *“fundamental fault line between the military and humanitarians, humanitarians are motivated by a moral compass”*, something the military should not be in the same way.

Exercises, usually drawing on the experiences of the training staff, presented fictional (Afghan based) locations and scenarios, and required the teams to work together to collect cultural information, and then formulate a plan of action to a series of problems. Within this setting empathy, coded as a feminine quality, was appropriated, masculinised, and rationalised and a space created that allowed the expression of masculine performance based on these controlled practices. Here, empathy became masculinised only because it was considered necessary to perform effectively ‘in theatre’, and ‘win the war’ – not a means to ‘do nice stuff for people’, but as a means to ‘make the mission work’ (see also Welland, 2015b: 117). However, compared to combat training, the boundaries of behaviour and associated thought process were much less tangible, they were fluid and grey; the teams were required to develop a subtle awareness of where these boundaries and constraints lay through training scenario after training scenario.

Mock up Forward Operating Base (FOB) training put lectures and classroom exercises into practice. While some team members manned the sangers with their SA80 rifles and kept watch over the FOB, I watched as other team members interacted with various Afghans⁸ walking up to the FOB to speak with the Operatives. Such ‘Walk-In’ role play exercises ranged from meeting local nationals at the FOB gate to escorting them in, and sitting down and listening to the issues they had. For example, three Afghan village elders arrive, furious because ISAF troops had been firing at their homes; another concerned a local national hurt during an ISAF offensive, where livestock had been killed; and a third concerns a drug raid by the ANP (Afghan National Police) resulting in the arrest of five men; the father of one, a village elder, wanted to know what has happened to his son, and a ‘local national’ reported that they had seen a member of ‘the Taliban’ loading a trailer. Afterwards, one of the training staff mentioned to me that despite the training it would take the Teams two months to get up to speed when they ‘hit the ground’, and even then they would need to realise that “there was no definitive solution”. I watched one Officer Commanding having a chat with his team, trying to explain to those who were struggling with the ambiguity of the role, stating that they needed to start “thinking outside the box”. Many of the new recruits ‘got it’, and, although a challenge, took to the role relatively quickly. Others found the ambiguity and flexibility frustrating. Informal conversation revealed that they just wanted to “go out and slot Taliban”.

4. HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT?

The practices of the Stabilisation Operative include the ability to influence the employment of both kinetic and importantly open up the potential for non-kinetic ‘effect’ through non-kinetic forms of violence. These are, however, hidden under a cloak of empathy and ‘tea parties’ - the ultimate aim still being to ‘destroy the enemy’. The violence of ‘collateral damage’ remains; it is merely amplified in a range of indirect ways.

Over the last ten years the UK’s Military Stabilisation Support Group has had to fight to win

⁸ ‘British Born Afghans’, a collective term used for Afghans brought in to assist with training.

credibility with the wider British military. It has had to re-invent itself, to adapt to the centrality of the Group's function during NATO-led operations in Afghanistan, and to counteract the perceived negatively gendered "pink and fluffy" stereotype attached to population-centred soldering roles. Worthy of note is the paradox produced between the speed at which military operations take place on the ground and the speed at which the Armed Forces as an entity change and adapt. It was evident during my research that the British military was just beginning to understand 1990s conceptions of Civil-Military Co-operation, that is, learning to de-conflict what the civilian population was doing from the main military effort, but it was patently evident that it was struggling to come to terms with Stabilisation aims and practices (as also demonstrated by Catignani, 2012). One informant reflected to me, the "military is catching up but it's still a generation behind". But what are the broader effects of this chameleon-like military operation and this particular form of violence that is 'hidden in plain sight'?

These indirect forms of violence, which can take a myriad of forms and stretch out along a political, economic and social continuum, become concealed through the agency of the chameleon-like masculinity of the Stabilisation Operative; this agency shifts, mutates, and does certainly become hidden in plain sight. Claire Duncanson, writing about the comparable 'softer' 'peacekeeper masculinity' from 1990s Peace Support Operations, suggests that this gentler masculinity is 'problematic because although it disrupts elements of the traditional linkages between militarism and masculinity, it still relies on a feminized and racialized 'Other'' (Duncanson, 2009: 63). However, she argues that the peacekeeper masculinity 'can alternatively be considered part of a 'regendered military' that may be a necessary component of successful conflict resolution' (ibid).

These problems remain with the 'new' masculinities opened up and deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the one hand, they can be read as opening the space for a (re)negotiation of gender that is potentially more progressive than some critiques would allow, providing an example of how the military can re-socialise its troops when it has the will or there is the political impetus, especially in relation to the inclusion of women, as well as shining a light on the rigidity of the predominantly male combat arms to change. But on the other hand, Stabilisation operatives are still agents of both kinetic and non-kinetic violence in the name of the State. Indeed, feminist critiques argue that these so-called 'soft-power' orientated soldier-scholar masculinities are merely an example of how hegemonic 'warrior' masculinity has always functioned, shifting and mutating in order to retain power (Khalili, 2010; Dyvik, forthcoming). Khalili argues that such masculinities are not an example of progress, but a shift purely for what is needed at the time; doing nothing to tackle unequal gender relations, the privileging of masculinity over femininity and other subordinate masculinities, where relations of hierarchy are being continuously constructed through 'othering' and 'subordinating' (Khalili, 2010; Wibben and McBride, 2012). Put another way, military personnel are only interested in local populations and their cultures in order to gather better intelligence. To do this they need to *appear* kinder, softer, and gentler when in fact the military is being deeply insidious in their use of local people to 'defeat the enemy'.

Significantly, these Operatives encapsulate what has been politically represented by Western advocates for Stabilisation approaches as the ‘ultimate in civic virtue, ... the embodiment of international wisdom, war-fighting prowess, and a kind of knowingness about the world’ (Khalili, 2010: 1487). This connects to the broader politics and ethics Stabilisation Operatives serve and generally come to valorise. For example, Major R_, in the quote that introduces this article, states that the role of the Stabilisation Operative was like learning to become ‘*a bit like being a chameleon*’, but not ‘*in a deceptive way*’. My sense of this was that Major R_ was not being disingenuous and that he believed for the most part in what he was doing. This is similar to the explanation that the ‘switching heads’ Colour Sergeant gave me when he explained that his role was for the “good and benefit of the people”. However, the notion of the ‘compassionate soldier’ is problematic, as Welland (2015b) explicitly examines. The highly charged emotion of compassion as a belief in ‘doing good’ serves to obscure ‘the simultaneous presence of weaponry, violence and death’ (ibid.: 117). The politics this serves has been well documented. The general conceptualisation is that behind Western liberal interventionism, international peace and stability is threatened by ‘fragile states’, which are characterised by weak governance and violent conflict (Duffield, 2001). In fostering this Western interventionist liberal approach that bolsters and supports the development of these so-called ‘failing’ or ‘failed state’ structures and filling the perceived development gap by funding and designing projects at local and provincial levels, ‘stabilisation’ will ensue, conflict will decrease, and in so doing diminish international security threats from these sources (Duffield, 2002). Post 9/11 such approaches have proliferated. The development of the British ‘population-centred’ soldier is one of the ways in which the British military has responded to this overarching policy, illustrating how military personnel are subject to the politics of militarism in wider society.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have shown how chameleon masculinity is an indirect form of concealed violence that is embodied and valorised by British Stabilisation Operatives. It reflects both the shifting tendency of the military originally raised by Clausewitz and also by my anthropological research. The embodiment of the Military Stabilisation Support Group is manifested through bodies, both individual and collective. The competing pulls, tensions and existential crises are expressed through the shift in outward character and inward nature to create this politicalised, militarised, and particularly gendered response. Herein lies the under-researched space in-between where the traditional warrior ethos and its associated practices are challenged by the new chameleon-like masculinity of the Stabilisation Operative. The analogy of the chameleon proves useful to demonstrate not only the changing nature of military character, but also how gender can be manipulated in political and also emotional terms in the process of war.

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